Here is a condensed transcript of interview of Michael Kirst, retiring president of the State Board of Education, by EdSource writer John Fensterwald on Dec. 28, 2018.

EdSource: So Mike, looking back what satisfies you the most after eight years as president of a state board and all the changes that you helped create?

Kirst: I think that we were able to think systemically in terms of all of the policies that you needed to address to improve the system. And that we made it coherent and aligned.

The other thing is we promulgated high new standards for what students should know and be able to do in the four subject matters, and really rethought those. We're just beginning with Next Generation Science and history-civics.

So often state policy has different directions within itself. The finance system's going one way and the assessment system is going the other way or the curriculum framework and the testing aren't well aligned or there's no addressing of special education or career and technical education.

And we have done well on communicating that this is going to take awhile – patience, persistence, humility and uncertainty about things like the LCAP, which had never been done before, and then continuous improvement. I think we've got really good curricular standards, which were at the core of what you align state policy around. So that looks good.

EdSource: What makes you confident that this is the right system to implement?

Kirst: I've looked at reforms over time, going back even before George W. Bush. The policy system and the politics push accountability much faster than they push the capacity of educators to implement the standards and the instructional improvement.

EdSource: What does that mean?

Kirst: Most of the groups that have come before the state board or the Legislature are pushing more accountability. More and more things in the dashboard. And more intervention. The Every Student Succeeds Act – ESSA – pushes that. And that's the predominant thing.

What you hear much less about and much less money spent on is, for example, “How are we going to take all the mathematics teachers in elementary grades and enable them to teach Common Core mathematics?” Professional development – now it’s called professional learning communities– takes a long time.

EdSource: What worries you the most, looking ahead?

Kirst: The capacity of the local educators to teach to the high standards that we have promulgated and to implement the instructional improvement implied in the standards. So our mathematics test scores and every other indicator we have, for example, still have a long way to go. I think that's really the job of the next administration.

EdSource: Looking ahead 10 years, can you foresee that the system you created will remain intact or will another wave of reform come and undo the work that you and others have done?

Kirst: I don't know. The real threat that blows up the systemic, aligned and coherent integrated approach we have is one-by-one categoricals. In the year before Gov. Schwarzenegger left, the

Legislature and he added 27 categoricals just before Gov. Brown came in. And that seems to be the natural instinct of the Legislature. And so only a governor can shut that down. And Brown showed very clearly that you can shut that down and hold the fort.

Local control

EdSource: One of the assumptions that Gov. Brown made under local control was that you wouldn't need to give billions of dollars for professional development or whatever you call it – that districts could figure out what they need and they'll implement them. But do I hear you saying either there's not enough money for this kind of long-term training or that's not where districts necessarily put their pot of money?

Kirst: I think that they're not putting enough money towards that but they're not getting much support from the policy system and the politics to do that. Every time we omit an indicator or we don't have a chronic absence rate in the high school, there's a big brouhaha. But if you know half the math teachers, for example, are struggling, there's very little discussion of that at the local level.-

EdSource: There's a difference between prescribing a particular program and saying as the governor did several years ago, when he had one-time money, here's this money; you can use it for professional development or several things. Why not that?

Kirst: You could do that generically. There should be discussion of building some kind of state funding that would give districts guidance on how to do more of this. I don't think we've provided, along with the California Department of Education, much leadership in how to do this capacity building.

System of support

EdSource: We've created a system of support that involves county offices of education taking the lead providing assistance for districts. Then there's a California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, a new agency. And also the California Department of Education. At this point how comfortable or how optimistic are you that some of the capacity building is going to be occurring under this mixture?

Kirst: I don't have confidence or no confidence. It is really just getting off the ground. I would have hoped that the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence would have been further along than it's been. To me that's a major disappointment in terms of where they are in terms of helping out.

EdSource: What do you think it should be doing, because it is small?

Kirst: I think it should be strategizing on the problem we've been talking about and offering more clear solutions about how to do it.

EdSource: You're saying the focus has been on levers and pressure as opposed to the underlying issues.

Kirst: That's exactly right. It's a theory of action that accountability alone will enable the system to improve. Accountability in my view is a necessary but not sufficient condition. And we have not gotten around to a deep discussion of this sufficient condition.

EdSource: When you first went to Washington in the ’60s, you were the guy putting in all of the levers of pressure. Has this been an evolution in your thinking as well?

Kirst: Yes, it has been a huge evolution and I really didn't catch on to this until the 1990s. It took me that long working with Richard Elmore of Harvard and David Cohen of the University of Michigan. We were in a policy research group that had six universities, called Consortium for Policy Research In Education.

Agency for children

EdSource: So what are the other drags on the system?

Kirst: I did a report when I was co-director of PACE in 1989 called the Conditions of Children. We looked at every aspect of children's lives in California — the music they listen to, their religion. But we also looked at all of the problems. But the politically correct way to think about this in the recent past was George W. Bush's view that any talk beyond education to solve these problems like the achievement gap is the soft bigotry of low expectations. So education alone could do it. Teachers needed to pull up their socks, work harder and pound them with accountability. Shame them with NCLB and we'd get Nirvana. Then the charter movement talked about no excuses. You know you can't talk about children outside of schooling.

I think that there may be a growing view that children's issues and the overall conditions of families are interconnected. We have to face the fact that schooling needs some backups, that we need to think more about children holistically.

EdSource: Aren't the dashboard and the Local Control Funding Formula's multiple measures — parent involvement, student engagement – addressing it indirectly? For once you get into student engagement, you get into broader issues outside of school.

Kirst: And school climate. Yes. I think that's only part of it. That's not going to help children's health, for example. And that's not going to help kids who are in trouble with juvenile justice.

EdSource: Is it then the expectation that within the given resources that schools have, they will address these issues we are talking about?

Kirst: We're talking about a different paradigm, which is you have children's policy. To me the state government ought to create an entity which would oversee child and youth development that would work in tandem with the education area. It could even be in the governor's office.

Special education

EdSource: I thought when you mentioned drags on the system, you were also going to perhaps talk about a teacher shortage, more funding for the system and also the issue of teacher evaluations — at least the lack of a strong useful system of teacher evaluation.

Kirst: Those all are part of teacher capacity building. Evaluation would clearly be helpful if designed right. I think we're past the thing of test-driven teacher evaluation and we can work on that in the future.

EdSource: I thought you might mention special education. You purposely did not include special education in the funding formula.

Kirst: Yeah, it was a disappointment. We couldn't devise anything that would have a winning coalition or that even made sense in some ways. And there's still a stalemate on that and no resolution. My basic view is we need a whole policy center somewhere in California to just look at special ed. I'm talking with WestEd about establishing a special education policy center. We just don't have enough intellectual resources on this.

A lot of districts and schools have been identified for students with disabilities on the dashboard. We don't have the teachers; we don't have the teacher training system with enough capacity to produce teachers. There's quite a bit of teaching strategy, which is quite difficult. So I would single out special education as another area where you could say, “Where's the capacity to get the schools and districts out of the red on the dashboard?”

School funding

EdSource: Do we need more money for school?

Kirst: Yeah I think we need more money. There's no doubt about that. We're very high in child poverty and average or low, depending on how you adjust for costs, on spending. As a short-term palliative I think we should really consider the phase-out of when you lose enrollment. When you lose a pupil or two from a classroom you don't lay off the whole teacher.

EdSource: The argument that districts make is that the funding formula is fine but the base isn't big enough and therefore you get this tension where you encroach on supplemental and concentration funding — money that's supposed to go for high-needs students. And that's because the base isn't big enough; it's just a reality they face. Do you agree?

Kirst: Yeah, I think the base needs to grow more. I think it has been big enough as we leveled them up. The real issue is declining enrollment. If you're growing, you're still not in bad shape. But we also need to look at what a future base should be. I think that's a wide-open question and requires some kind of study.

EdSource: What do you mean by that?

Kirst: When we did the Local Control Funding Formula, we projected forward seven years. And so we've now met that target. And so we didn't calculate anything beyond that. And of course we did not calculate in the pensions at that time.

EdSource: The problem is if you don't increase the base substantially, then that's an open invitation to return to categorical funding, no?

Kirst: I think it is.

EdSource: One of the bills that was introduced last year and will come back says basically we want to raise the base so that we can achieve at some point the level of the top 10 funding per-student in the nation. Is it something that we should shoot for, or is that not how you measure things?

Kirst: Well it could be something we shoot for, but it's so ambitious that it won't drive policy very effectively. What we did was set up something for seven years and we might not get into the top 10. But this was something doable and achievable and people could hold us accountable.

EdSource: $55 billion to get into the top 10.

Kirst: $55 billion. How's that going to drive policy?

Changes to the formula?

EdSource: Looking back, are you satisfied with the formula that you came up with? Do you think it needs any changing?

Kirst: Not really. I haven't seen any convincing case — and I could be open to it — but I haven't seen any studies. And I think like just adding on to it for low-achieving children, that that sort of means you get more money if you have more low-achieving children and so that goes back to what I view as negative incentives.

EdSource: The question I have is, how can achievement gains be made without really directing and confronting how districts place the least experienced teachers in classrooms with students with the highest needs. Even with Local Control Funding Formula and with accountability, that seems to be a perpetual problem that many districts don't deal with.

Kirst: Under our laws that's part of the local collective bargaining process and that's an issue for school boards. It's interesting people always asked state officials about these problems and never their school boards. So that to me is a bargaining issue until the Legislature decides otherwise and somebody shows a new different way of doing it.

Expanded data system

EdSource: One of the findings in the Getting Down to Facts studies is that the system's been hampered by our lack of a really good quality statewide data system that goes down to early childhood and connects K-12 with higher ed plus provides other data too. Do you agree and do you think that this should happen?

Kirst: I agree and I think it should happen. And I don't think doing it is going to be that difficult, except through the higher education system, where data is scattered across the three systems and in the private systems of higher education as well. The issue that arises is who should control this process? Who would be the arbiter of this? Where would you put the people that put it all together? How would you enforce it among the three higher education systems?

EdSource: Great questions. But other states have figured this out. Why hasn't California?

Kirst: Partly because many of the states don't have the siloed system of higher education we do. They have, you know, a very strong coordinating board. We have a huge system out there. The Student Aid Commission that does Cal Grants for postsecondary students — we've never been able to get all of that data. And now you're saying to me, you have Humpty Dumpty on the floor here, and we should copy other states. Well, you know, they didn't start with Humpty Dumpty in pieces.

EdSource: Why it has been so hard to persuade Gov. Brown? What was it about data that he just distrusted?

Kirst: He distrusted a system of centralized data that didn't have proper controls on it and didn't have some kind of system for governing. And the proposals that came down never created a governing system.

Working with Jerry Brown

EdSource: What is one area that you wish you had been able to persuade Jerry Brown to act and he said no?

Kirst: I can't think of a big area.

EdSource: Then, what's an area where you had an influence or where you made a difference in terms of the governor's policy or legislation that the governor adopted?

Kirst: I think this systemic reform idea that we have to move on these policies, many of them at the state level, and make them coherent and aligned would be the biggest thing.

EdSource: He trusted turning that over to you?

Kirst: Well, no, he consulted with lots of people. I had a good chance to say things and Karen Stapf Walters, the executive director of the board, and I agreed. We brought in Sue Burr, who he had a high regard for as a former chief adviser to him. So the three of us were a phalanx. He did talk to other people. But overriding that threesome would be difficult for him.

EdSource: Did you spend a lot of time with him over the past eight years?

Kirst: We just saw him a lot. And he was in no hurry. It wasn't like I've got 10 minutes or a half-hour. We went in there with an agenda and he'd throw his other topics into the conversation that we weren't expecting to address that day. So he wanted to broaden the conversation of things he'd heard or thought about. He was an assiduous reader of opinion, of newspaper editorials. He was reading them all — from obscure and rather small circulation papers.

EdSource: Do we plan to hear from you again, Mike, on these issues, or are you going to be an angry commenter to EdSource but not play another role that's more visible?

Kirst: I don't know. There's a new regime coming in. I have had positive and forthright conversations with the new superintendent and the new governor and I'm going to see where the landscape is. One of the things that I learned clearly in the first month of being state board president in 2011 was it was difficult for me to get in front of the governor. And so now I don't have that inhibition and I will get in front of this governor even though I wish him well and like him personally.